THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

A Whole New Religion

John M. Buchanan

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"The spirit of reforming Protestantism is a God-centered and Christ-formed attitude of faithful participation in the world. It is a manner of living reordered and reformed by a radical devotion to God and God's transformative purpose in Jesus Christ.... It is a critical temper or cast of mind rooted in the conviction that all persons, communities, and institutions are infected by sin's corruption. It is an optimistic and generous spirit, uplifted by the sense that, despite sins corruption, grace abounds. The spirit of Reforming Protestantism consists of a faithfulness at home in the midst of things that is marked by a responsibly realistic effort to restrain evil and a creatively responsible attempts to pursue good.

Douglas F. Ottati
Reforming Protestantism

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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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A WHOLE NEW RELIGION
JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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Psalm 50: 1-6
Mark 2: 13-22

Forty years ago, last month, February 1, 1960, four young men walked into the Woolworth store on South Elm Street in Greensboro, North Carolina, and in a simple act that captivated my imagination, changed the world. They sat down at the lunch counter, and ordered sodas, coffee, doughnuts. Their names were Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, Ezell Blair and David Richmond. They were teenagers, freshmen at North Carolina Agriculture and Technical State University. They were African-Americans: negroes was the word we used then. The employee behind the counter refused to take their orders and asked them to leave. Black people were required to stay out of white restaurants, use only black designated water fountains and restrooms, sit in a separate balcony at the Center Theater and in segregated bleachers at War Memorial Stadium, and of course go to their own segregated schools and colleges.

The store manager appeared and told the four young men that they were going to get into an awful lot of trouble, that he was going to call the police. He said, "I'll die before I serve you guys because this is the way things are in the South, and this is the way we're going to do it. We're not going to integrate this counter." (Joe MacNeil, ABC News Service, "Pride and Prejudice, Civil Rights Sit-In" 1998)

The four did not leave. They stayed there at that lunch counter and their refusal to submit to social custom began the most significant revolution in American history in a century. They were joined at the counter by other students from North Carolina Agriculture and Technical. When news of what was happening in Greensboro spread throughout the nation, young people and not-so-young people traveled to Greensboro to stand with them. Some Greensboro churches supported them, thanks be to God. Their quiet act of sitting down at a lunch counter challenged a system of social and legal injustice in the most eloquent and powerful way possible. That system was supported, ironically but enthusiastically, by Bible quoting Christian churches and Christian people. The four young men didn't make fiery speeches. They didn't throw fire bombs or shoot guns. They simply ordered coffee and doughnuts.

One day Jesus and his new friend, Levi, did the same thing. They sat down and ate together and changed the world. Levi was not as conspicuously identifiable by his skin color as the four young black men at the Greensboro lunch counter, but he was every bit as much an outsider, a despised and marginalized outcast, who under no condition would be welcome at table with respectable people.

Levi was a tax collector and universally loathed. This is how it worked. The Romans had created a unique and effective way of collecting taxes—a most unpleasant responsibility in any society, including our own. As April 15 approaches, IRS employees begin to feel heat.

Tax collecting is infinitely more unpleasant when the government is an alien, occupying force—the enemy itself. And so Rome actually sold the function and office of Tax Collector to regional brokers who then employed locals to do the dirty work. The system was lucrative because the local tax collector, after having been given his financial quota, was allowed to set the rate himself and to enjoy the profits from whatever he was able to collect, a system built on the notions of greed, corruption and abuse. So the local tax collector is a Jew who has betrayed his fellow Jews by working for the Romans, and betrayed them again by profiting from their subjugation. To make matters infinitely worse, he was a sinner. Because of his associations with Gentiles and his dealings in the dirty business of Roman tax collecting, he was liturgically and religiously unclean. Nobody, in fact, wanted to be seen in the company of a tax collector. Nobody was the friend of a tax collector. Nobody would be caught dead sitting at table with a tax collector.

Well, that's exactly who Jesus calls to be a disciple. It is in a wonderful series of healings with which Mark introduces the story of Jesus. Anne Lamott says the world sometimes seems like the waiting room of the emergency ward and they're all there in the first two chapters of Mark: the man possessed by an unclean spirit—we would call him mentally ill, and Jesus restores him to health; Peter's feverish mother-in-law, a man with leprosy—Jesus touches him, breaks with religious and social custom and touches an unclean man and restores him to wholeness and his family, his friends his synagogue; a paralytic lowered into his presence through a hole in the roof by four good friends, and now Levi—whose illness is different, an illness created by his social and economic situation. It is, I propose, another healing, a restoring of a needy and hurting human being to wholeness, a giving back of a lost and hopeless life. And this time he does it in a most dramatic, but no less miraculous way.

Jesus calls a sinner, a despicable traitor, an ultimate outsider, to be his disciple. Scholars say that act alone—that invitation—is an act of radical grace and forgiveness and an act of radical civil disobedience.

And then, things get really interesting. Levi who lives pretty much alone, walks the streets alone, ignored by his neighbors, not welcome in the Synagogue, lives almost as if he has an infectious disease and is quarantined—is suddenly a celebrity. Someone has paid public attention to him. Someone values him for who he is—beneath his role as tax collector. So Levi does something incredible: stands up and walks away from his tax table and follows this man who has cut through all the accumulated social, economic and religious custom and touched this man and then he does something further. Levi decides to have a dinner party to celebrate and who does he invite—the Board of Trustees of the Synagogue? No—he invites his friends—the only friends he has—other tax collectors and sinners.

Anthropologists love this scenario. In a book with the wonderful title, *Consuming Passions: The Anthropology of Eating,* the author notes "In all societies, both simple and complex, eating is a primary way of initiating and maintaining human relationships. Once the anthropologist finds out where, when and with whom the food is eaten, just about everything else can be inferred about relations among the society's members." (Peter Farb and George Armelagos, *Consuming Passions: The Anthropology of Eating,*

Boston, Houghton Miflin, 1980, p.4 and 211, in John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography*, p. 68)

Eating rules are a miniature model of a society's rules for association and socialization. The fraternities at Princeton University used to be called "Eating Clubs." When we entertain, we have dinner together. When we want to initiate a relationship, we say, "Let's do lunch sometime." When guests arrive, we put the coffee on. By sitting down in Levi's house with that crowd, Jesus was challenging his society's fundamental social values. And he was stepping outside the boundaries of orthodox religion in a profound and radical and challenging way.

Meanwhile, the Scribes, the Board of Trustees of the Synagogue, are standing out in the street fuming. "Would you look at that? Eating with that crowd! It's a disgrace! He's a disgrace!"

And Jesus overhears and says: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." Which is not exactly a criticism but a gentle reminder that if you are not aware of your sickness you're not likely to seek and receive healing. These folks are righteous. They are good, admirable, upright, responsible citizens. They don't steal from their neighbors, or collaborate with the Romans or defile themselves. They don't cheat or extort, and they abide by the religious law. There's nothing wrong with them in that sense. They are not, in the orthodox sense sinners unless, that is, righteousness becomes self-righteousness, a kind of sickness itself whose major symptom is an inability to be honest about one's own needs. Or as Mark Twain once put it: "He's a good man, in the very worst sense of the word."

So maybe the healer from Capernaum wants to make them whole too, but to get to them it's going to take some real creativity and imagination because they don't know they're sick. In the meantime, the dialogue continues—the questioning: "Why don't you obey the fasting rules, Jesus, like John the Baptist's disciples, like the Pharisees? Why don't you keep the Sabbath the way our law and tradition requires? Why are you insisting on tramping on our dearest and most precious customs and rules?"

His response: "No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak . . . no one puts new wine in old wineskins." When new cloth shrinks it tears the garment it is patching. New wine bursts old skins and everything is lost. These sayings are often misheard and misunderstood. He is not saying "old is bad, good is new. He is saying that the new cannot always be contained by, expressed by old customs and structures. It is not at all that the traditional ways are wrong: they're just not supple enough, flexible enough, imaginative enough to contain the newness of God's love and grace.

In a wonderful commentary on this story, Doug Loving writes that "disruption of revered patterns spawns anxiety in any age.

I heard John Mulder talk last week about the continuing decline in membership of the Presbyterian Church(USA) and how losing members has become a kind of tradition with us. John told about a revival which as held in a small rural Kentucky town near Louisville. In the middle of the week-long revival, the town's three ministers got together for a cup of coffee and to compare notes.

The Southern Baptist minister was effusive. "The Lord has blessed us mightily," he said. 'We had ten conversions last night." The Methodist minister, with equal enthusiasm said, "The Lord has blessed us, too. We received five new members." The Presbyterian minister, much more reserved, said, "God has been good to us, too. We lost ten of the worst members this church ever had."

Anxiety drives us to seek protection, to shut out the new and intensify efforts to sanctify the status quo. We don't like it when established patterns, traditional ways of doing things, time-honored customs or orthodoxies are challenged and changed. Anyone who knows much about the Bible knows that it's mostly about God calling people to go places they don't want to go and do things they don't want to do.

Doug writes: "Functionally, it appears that we don't much like it either. Instead of embracing those beyond our doors who are hungry for good news, we often remain contained within our traditions, focused on in-house concerns. Who is truly righteous, who can be ordained to what positions? We burrow into our rules, comb the books of discipline. Preoccupied with high-profile church dramas, we find our energy drained, our passion chilled." (*The Christian Century,* 2/16/00, p. 177)

I love the way Jesus responds to his self-righteous critics. They make a pretty fat target, after all. Who could resist pointing out their hypocrisy, the rank irony of their position—purporting to represent the God of all people, by excluding those who don't measure up to the standards and requirements of their law and tradition? Most of us can't resist and have a field day making that group of self-righteous pietists into a metaphor for everything we don't like about institutional religion.

Jesus doesn't do that. He doesn't scold or lecture. Instead, the tone of his response is sadness, I think. He's sad that his people are missing the point: that his people have made an idol, a god, out of their religious tradition, that in their obsession with protecting what is precious, they have missed the newness of God's love and grace.

Would he not be sad at the level of religious discourse in this country last week, at the specter of Bob Jones University using his name to sustain traditions of racial prejudice and religious intolerance and theological exclusion? Would he not be grieved by his Presbyterian and Methodist and Episcopal people expending their energy and resources trying to keep unclean sinners away from leadership? Would he not be sad about religious denominations and congregations quibbling, arguing, shameing themselves by missing his radical and welcoming love for all people?

Our Lord's responses, unlike mine which can become self-righteous themselves, reveal an infinite patience with human frailty, an infinite confidence that we can hear good news and actually live it, an infinite love for all—tax collectors-sinners, scribes-sinners; all,

each a precious child of God who is invited to pull up a chair and join the banquet that celebrates his love.

Jesus moves from argument to healing. His love reaches out to rejected outsiders and self-righteous insiders. His love wants to make all of us whole—regardless of who we are.

Things begin to change when people sit down to eat together.

One of the Greensboro four remembers: "Those were risky moments for us. McCain and I were the first to sit (at the counter)." McCain recollects that an elderly white woman came and sat beside him, and engaged him in conversation and indicated to him that she was very disappointed. And he said he looked at her quizzically and said, "Ma'am?" And she says, "Yes, I'm very disappointed. What you're doing now, you should have done years ago." (ABC News, "Pride and Prejudice," 1998).

So, friends, things can be different, must be different in our church and in our community and in our world. Because there is one who stands with us and calls us to represent his welcoming, forgiving and inclusive love for all. We learned to think differently about race. The law changed; social custom changed; religion changed. Hearts changed. We're not done yet—but we have come a long way. And we will learn to think differently about the human race and who's out and who's in and God's amazing grace that welcomes, affirms, loves all.

That lunch counter, by the way, has been located and taken apart and crated and shipped to Washington, D.C., where it is on display at the Smithsonian, a symbol of how political and social reform happens in a free society, a symbol of how a people reclaimed their lost humanity.

And that table in Capernaum, where for the first time the world saw a meal where all were welcome, witnessed for the first time a new religion that, in the name of God, excludes no one . . . that table will be found somewhere in every church that bears his name.

It is our most precious symbol, our most sacred tradition; a family reunion to which he invites all of us, a banquet at which every one of us will one day sit down, a table which stands for his hospitality and grace, and in his love, our wholeness, our healing, our forgiveness, our peace, our salvation.

Thanks be to God.